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ABSTRACT

This document describes a public administration internship course. The paper illustrates how student intern experiences can be used as a base in a public administration internship course to teach about public administration, and to show how students' practice can help them learn, understand, and remember theory. In the course the students worked as volunteers in public agencies, met as a biweekly group in a seminar fashion, read articles, and wrote journal themes. The professor used a discussion on assigned articles to show students how to use their agency experience to understand some of the ideas from these assignments, using their intern work as an experimental testing ground for the administrative theory they were reading. Learning public administration theory, concepts, and ideas is the primary goal. The intern experience is brought back into the classroom to use as a vehicle to teach public administration. The paper describes four reading assignment themes. These are Max Weber's idea of hierarchy, social dynamics in a bureaucracy, human centered bureaucracy, and the culture of organizations. Using student intern experience to teach has three clear benefits: (1) it insures enthusiastic participation in class discussion; (2) it creates an experiential context to learn new concepts and uses new vocabulary; and (3) it makes it more likely that concepts will be understood and remembered. (DK)

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Applying Theory to Practice in Public Administration Internships

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There is an idea, expressed or implied, that real learning can only take place in a classroom using a lecture format. This is where serious work takes place; this is how important ideas get communicated.

Some have criticized this traditional approach and argued in favor of a more interactive style. For them, the lecture was likened to the "banking method" of education where an instructor deposits information into allegedly empty heads (Schilb, 1985: 258). The students were only passive receivers. Perhaps that is why testing showed that a lot of what was being deposited was not sticking.

In April, 1989, The National Endowment for the Humanities tested nearly 700 seniors in 4-year institutions on their exposure to "basic landmarks of history and thought." The results made headlines. Nearly 40% did not know when the Civil War was fought; nearly 30% thought Reconstruction referred to American aid in Europe; almost 60% did not know who was President during the Korean War; and one quarter could not distinguish the thoughts of Karl Marx from the ideas in the American Constitution.

Why did so many students not know these facts? It is possible that they were never taught them. It is also possible that the students lack the skill to remember them; and it is possible that students misunderstood and did not remember these "landmark" facts and concepts because the context in which they were presented was foreign to them. Thus, for example, Marxists thoughts or ideas could be confused with ideas in the American Constitution because the students understood these concepts in a different sense than the one the teacher intended (Maher, 1985: 39). How many times have we read exams in which the students interpreted concepts wrong, sometimes so inaccurately as to be humorous? And even when students succeeded in learning the "basic landmarks," they were merely memorizing them without expecting the content to have any "personal relevance or meaning" (they learned them "for the test" and not "for themselves.")

Experiential learning, teaching new information by building on the students' experiences, avoids the pitfalls of "no context." This paper will illustrate how student intern experiences can be used as a base in a public administration internship course,

to teach about public administration--how students' practice can help them learn, understand and remember theory.

The Course

The Public Administration internship course, which I offer every semester, probably does not look very different from many other courses taught across the country. My students work as volunteers in public agencies, meet as a group bi-weekly, in seminar fashion, read articles, and write journal themes. They have the option of taking the course for three or four units, depending on the number of hours per week in which they work for the government agency, and their grade is a composite of the agency's evaluation and my evaluation of their written work and seminar participation.

Some of the students enrolled have already taken the required Introduction to Public Administration. But some have not. Most of the students are politics majors, but a good number of students, over the years, come from other fields--economics, sociology, computer science, business, and biology and chemistry. I cannot assume they have any background in administrative/organizational behavior. Ten to twenty students, per semester, take the course.

At our meetings, every other week, I lead a discussion on that week's assigned article(s). The purpose of the discussion is to show them how to use their agency experience to understand some of the ideas from these assignments, using their intern work as an experimental testing ground for the administrative theory they are reading. Learning public administration theory, concepts, ideas is the primary goal. Thus, the course is philosophically consistent with what Benjamin Barber and Richard Battistoni write, in PS, about the Rutgers and Baylor University service programs. While service programs were traditionally associated with voluntarism and philanthropy, they write, their programs "began with an alternative thesis: That educational institutions are learning communities, not service agencies, and that the primary justification for service programs has to be pedagogical. This suggested the necessity of bringing service experience back into the classroom--treating community service as a practicum integral to a class-based learning experience" (1993:236). This is what I do. The intern experience is brought back into the classroom to use as a

vehicle to teach public administration. To illustrate this, I will describe four reading assignments from the course, examining some of the theories culled from them, followed by a description of the specific ways the students understand and illustrate these theories and themes with their internship experiences.

It is hard to imagine a course which teaches about public agencies not assigning Max Weber. He is one of the first authors my students are asked to read, and it is one of the easiest assignments for them to apply to their agency experience. Although they have had dealings with public bureaucracies all their lives, being "inside" the bureaucracy, I believe, helps them to learn Weberian principles in a more visceral way. For example, the Weberian idea of "fixed and official jurisdictional areas" is a concept they can experience even before they start work in their agency when I help them negotiate a placement. Often because of career goals, they are clear what "fixed jurisdictional areas" they want their placement to be in: a laboratory setting in the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for a biology major, the criminal division in the San Francisco District Attorney's (DA's) office for a pre-law student.

Weber's idea of hierarchy is an even easier lesson to learn with intern experience. Students enthusiastically describe the "firmly ordered system of super and subordination in which there is a supervision of the lower offices by the higher ones." The very best class illustrations come from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), but all the students have stories about how their agency makes them aware of its hierarchy and the student's place in it. Even students working for members of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, in what appears to be an hierarchically flat environment, describe the hierarchical checks on simple letters they draft for their Supervisors. The Weberian principles of professionalism, merit, penchant for paperwork all get enthusiastically illustrated during the class meeting, as well. The students use their intern experiences to illustrate and learn these concepts.

The rest of the class assignments, which I will discuss, focus on the complex of "social dynamics" in a bureaucracy. The readings provide an overview of themes which help familiarize the students with different approaches to the study of public organizations. For example, James Davis in a chapter of his book, The National

Executive Branch, views a (bureaucratic) organization from a variety of perspectives, among them, as a social system, as a political system, and as economies of incentives. In each case, the students "try on" the theory and evaluate its fit to where they work.

When viewing the organization as a social system, Davis focuses on social interactions, subgroups and subsystems, their norms and values, and the sanctions used to enforce them. Davis gives students, who had been noticing informal social networks and interactions which were quite apart from the organizational chart, a vocabulary with which to talk about these interactions. The students share descriptions of carpool arrangements, birthday clubs, lunch groups and descriptions of countless other informal office connections. Conceptually, they begin to see the importance to the organization of these interactions. Davis also provides concepts which the students can use to talk about their own accommodation to the norms of the organization. For example, when a student describes to his classmates even something as simple as how he learned what clothing was appropriate to wear to the office, the idea of "social norms and sanctions" becomes very real to him and his classmates.

Seeing the organization as a political system sensitizes the student to the distribution of authority in their agency. Political behavior, Davis tells us, involves conflict and conflict resolution, negotiation, bargaining and coalition building. Again students have a fertile field in which to apply and therefore to understand and learn this theory. For example, a student working in OPM described the timidity with which his unit proceeded on a project so as to avoid the possible conflict resulting from overstepping the unit's regional responsibilities; a student in the DA's office described how the personal conflict between two supervisors impacted on the clarity and consistency of her supervision. An intern who worked for the Council of State Governments described how carefully his office negotiated with the states within their jurisdiction to forward the Council's agenda. And another student intern who worked for a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors described how articulating jurisdictional lines of authority helped to resolve conflict between two aides in his office (a little like solving a border dispute).

The class discussion on organization incentive systems, another concept from

the Davis assignment, always leads to enthusiastic discussion, because students are placed in so many different kinds of public agencies. The theory of incentive systems posits that organizations offer three categories of incentives- purposive, material, or solidary incentives (or some combination) to get organization members to contribute (work). Students assigned to work in the Probate Court, which investigates elder abuse, report enthusiastic employee commitment to agency goals and they conclude that a strong purposive incentive is operating there. Students find the same enthusiastic employee motivation in the Consumer Fraud Unit in the DA's office. There, too, is a high level of commitment to the organization's purpose of ferreting out abuse (strong purposive incentive). But the solidary incentive, students report, is also at work in both places. The students who work in these agencies experience an informal and friendly atmosphere filled with personal rapport and relationships.

Students also try to use incentive system theory to explain mismatches between people and agencies. Occasionally, a student is not happy in her placement, or sometimes, a disgruntled employee becomes the object of the class discussion. The class tries to explain the "bad fit" between person and agency by using the theory's three categories and describing the discrepancy between what the individual wants and what the organization offers and rewards. For example, an especially idealistic student might want her agency to affect more policy changes (purposive) and be less interested in agency picnics and possible letters of recommendation (solidary and material).

I assign a chapter from Carl Lutrin and Allen Settle's American Public Administration to familiarize students with theories of human-centered bureaucracy (a kind of antidote to Weber). The ideas from this chapter which usually generate the most enthusiastic discussion are Douglas McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y and Robert Presthus' three models of employee types: the upwardly mobile, the ambivalents and the indifferents. Here again, the students use their experiences and learn the concepts by applying them to their agencies. Theory X posits that people dislike work and require a dominant managerial style, otherwise nothing will ever get done. Theory Y posits that people are naturally motivated and even creative and need a supporting management not a directing one. The students evaluate which theory

best describes their office pattern. The Consumer Fraud division of the DA's office is an example of "theory Y," they all agree. Not so, for the Criminal Division of the DA's office that exemplifies "theory X." The students discuss how these management styles affect their motivation. They label intense supervision in the IRS or "nit-picking" control over their draft response letters in the Major's office as theory X and they are very eager to talk about how it makes them feel.

As for Presthus' categories, students describe, sometimes lavishly, the "upwardly mobile" people in their agencies. They also almost always provide a lot of detail when describing organization "indifferents," who could be secretaries who take long breaks or managers who only talk about their hobbies and vacations, not work-related subjects. The "ambivalents" are a little more complex as a category, but the students' illustrations clarify the concept of a person who is unwilling to play political games to get ahead within the organization, but, who is firmly committed to the agency's goals. Describing real people from their own experience who fit the mold helps students remember and use the categories.

More than any other of the readings, it is Richard Pascale's article on the "culture" of organizations that provokes the students into active sharing and animated debates. Pascale argues that organizations have unique cultures and that employees, starting from the day they interview, are socialized to conform to these cultures through a series of seven key steps. "It is time to take socialization out of the closet," Pascale says and he advocates strong culture firms.

Step one is the selection process, a little like romance, where a broken engagement is much better than a trial marriage. Recruits choose organizations and organizations choose new employees. Occasionally, a student will ask me for another intern assignment after their first agency interview.

Step two is humility-inducing experiences during the first months in the organization where, with humiliation, the individual's complacency is lowered to promote openness to the new norms and values. Some federal agencies bury students with reading materials during their first few weeks.

Step three, in the trenches leads to mastery, to which promotion is inescapably tied. This field work reinforces the organization's orientation. With appropriate performance, students who work for a supervisor or in the Mayor's office are trusted increasingly with more challenging work.

Step four measures results tied to milestones based on factors that count. With successes and case completions, students are asked to resolve bigger and more complicated cases in the DA's office.

Step five refers to the organization's adherence to transcendent values. A commitment to the organization's higher goals, such as a commitment to a healthier environment (Environmental Protection Agency) or to equal rights (Office for Civil Rights), or a truly responsive Mayor's office (Citizen's Assistance Program), justify long-hours, missed weekends and some boring job assignments.

Step six is reinforcing folk law with legends and stories of watershed events. The stories reinforce the agency code of conduct. For example, the story of Frances Kelsey's professional resistance to drug company pressure while she investigated the drug Thalidomide, in the FDA, and thereby averted an American catastrophe, is an FDA "folk law" example which reinforces professional independence and integrity. During Spring 1993, one of my interns created a new layer of "folk law" in the San Francisco District Attorney's Office. Working in the Consumer Fraud division, she was given a case with a million dollar complaint. She resolved it, to the surprise of the office. The settlement was for $240,000, an amount which was more than the office usually recovers for all its complainants during an entire year. She was an instant celebrity, everyone knew about the quarter million dollar recovery, and she began to get extra training and attention. The story of her settlement was known to all her contemporaries; I have no doubt that interns, in the future, will hear about it, as well.

Step seven is using role models consistent with valued qualities. Protege's watch and copy those who are recognized as winners. Occasionally supervisors establish a mentoring relationship with my students. Sometimes the intern experience turns into a paying job.

When reading this article, the students realize that they have been absorbed by their agency and they have, to some extent, adopted its culture. When did it start?

The students wonder. When did they first start referring to their agency office as "our" office? Or their supervisor as "my" supervisor? Or the agency's goals as "our" goals? When did they start staying late or coming in on their off days? Why are they going to continue to work in their agency even after the semester ends? How did the agency manage to get them on board quite so effectively? The students ponder these questions while examining the Pascale steps to see which of them fit their own experience. But the Pascale article also provokes a lively discussion about the implications and morality of supporting and advocating a system of socialization which subsumes individuals so effectively into the agency culture.

Conclusion

Using student intern experience to teach has three clear benefits vis-a-vis the reading assignments. First, it almost always insures enthusiastic participation in class discussion; second, it creates an experiential context to learn new concepts and use new vocabulary; and third, it makes it more likely that concepts will be understood and remembered. Furthermore, the intern experience creates a classroom in which students are the "experts." This means that the center of discussion almost invariably moves away from me and to them. Soon, they are asking each other questions and I am learning from them.

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